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Reception and Contingency in Recent Art from Chile

ABSTRACT: The re-edition of the book *Margins and Institutions* by Nelly Richard, a landmark in the study of Chilean art produced during the dictatorship of General Pinochet, reminds of how the original publication contributed to shape a particular reception of these ephemeral works that almost nobody witnessed. The images of the book appear removed from time and space and do not give much information about their original situations, yet this article discusses how, paradoxically, this has enabled an intimate reception of those works: the personal memories of the audience filled in the gaps left by the book, as attested by an ethnographic research project carried out to explore the constructed nature of this response.

These ideas are discussed in relation to the recent process of internationalization of Chilean art, highlighting the differences between the contemporary context and the former one, and the importance of paying attention to the late receptor of these pieces.

KEY WORDS:

Chilean art, performance, documentation, ethnography, memory.

During January 2008 the Tate Modern in London was the site of the international launch of *Copiar el Eden: Arte Reciente en Chile/Copying Eden: Recent Art from Chile* (2006), a super-size book edited by the Cuban curator Gerardo Mosquera; the event inaugurated a series of international launches, debates and conferences about the text, including a long seminar held during the Venice Biennale 2009 and a number of more recent launches and re-launches in places such as the MAM in Sao Paulo, the Mori art Museum in Tokyo or the MACBA in Barcelona, amongst others; indeed, in an interview from June 2011 published in the on-line magazine *Artishock*, Mosquera mentioned that the book 'detonated' the globalization of Chilean art, adding to similar statements he has made in notes from the Chilean press. This is echoed in Lissette Olivares' critical review of the publication (2009), where she mentions that 'few, if any, art books in Chile's history have been as widely publicized and as (in)famous' as this one, and describes how these series of launches and events constitute a previously unseen and concentrated effort to make Chilean art visible to the global community; or in the enthusiasm of the article 'Arte Chileno sale a la conquista del mundo' ('Chilean art is off to conquer the world') from Chile.com, a privately run portal that encourages people to visit Chile and promotes the country as a vital, dynamic and plural place. This eagerness for the potential of the publication, which features the work of 74 artists produced during and after the constraints of the Chilean dictatorship, tuned in with a wide surge in the international presence of Chilean artists who worked actively during the Pinochet years: for instance at *Documenta XII* (Kassel 2007), the artist Lotty Rosenfeld re-enacted one of her urban

interventions, *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement* (originally from 1979), in which she draws several crosses by using the existing white lines in the street.

The case of Chilean art is, of course, not isolated. Many artworks, particularly performance-based works produced in Latin American countries that experienced the oppression of military regimes, have been exhibited in the international art circuit recently: another notorious example is the Argentinean *Tucumán Arde* (translated as Tucuman is Burning), which also featured in *Documenta XII* and in a series of international exhibitions; or the relentless presence of the work of the Brazilian Lygia Clark –originally conceived for therapeutic purposes, which demanded a direct encounter between the artist and the public—in the main venues of the contemporary art circuit. It is not possible to generalise the effects or the political currency of those works, neither then, nor now, but in most cases the curatorial strategies when exhibiting them have been focused on the archive character of the pieces, showing them either as documents (such as pictures, texts and artefacts) or acts or re-enactment (like the drawing of crosses mentioned above), literally performed again (indeed Rebecca Schneider notices how the term ‘reperformance’ has been established to refer to this kind of re-exhibition).

This article follows a different path by focusing on the ways in which these originally ephemeral art pieces produced during the military regime in Chile continue to live on the public who, paradoxically, never encountered them first-hand, rather than on their archival character. Though one particular document will substantially help me to address this: Nelly Richard’s *Margins and Institutions*, the book that still is the greatest critical landmark (in spite of the more recent *Copying*

Eden) for the study of art produced in opposition to Pinochet's dictatorship and, indeed, one of the very few sources of information available before the more recent process of dissemination. To some extent both *Margins and Institutions* and *Copying Eden* serve a similar purpose: the visualization of a country, even though why do the respective authors want it to be visible is significantly different. They both start from the same milestone: 1973, the year of the military coup and the beginning of the dictatorship of general Pinochet, which has then become an imposed periodization agent; Chilean art has been historicized as emerging in this 'after'. One of the first images of the *Copying Eden*, the photograph chosen to accompany Mosquera's introduction, is, precisely, the iconic picture of La Moneda (the palace of government in Santiago, Chile) being bombed and burned during that other September 11th, that of 1973. This milestone sets off the curator's efforts to showcase what he considers to be a relatively unknown art scene.

It is important to note that *Margins and Institutions*' original edition, from 1986, was published in Australia as a bilingual text (Spanish and English). In 2007, *Metales Pesados*, a bookshop and publisher based in Santiago, republished the text in an almost identical form, with the addition of a short presentation by the author and various papers read during a seminar dedicated to the book that took place in Santiago shortly after that publication. Held by the research centre FLACSO, this seminar brought together intellectuals and artists (Eugenio Dittborn, Diamela Eltit, Francisco Brugnoli and Pablo Oyarzún, amongst others) responding to the book from their own disciplines and approaches, and at the time their contributions were also published in a book of low-scale circulation. As Carolina Olmedo (2012) notes, during the dictatorship these art discussions happened in

small public lectures and circulated through photocopies shared directly by the limited circle of artists and critics; for that reason, she asks if it is at all possible to write about art history in a context of little direct access to relevant documents, an environment in which the sources have been replaced by their descriptions. Indirectly, this article answers that question by researching the public who encountered the mediated version of the original event.

The contribution of Adriana Valdés to that seminar held by FLACSO is particularly interesting for me since it shows an early interrogation of who was the potential public/reader of these artworks/text, beyond that particular circle of people, and even envisions a prospective academic receptor of this material (the work of Robert Neustadt, for instance, has been an example of this future interest). Valdés holds *Margins and Institutions* in high regard as a lucid attempt to create a space from which to read these works, yet also mentions that the existence of this type of writing —‘*que tiene mucho de subjetivo y ficticio*’ (Valdés, 1987: 87) (‘to a great extent subjective and fictional’)— cancelled itself because it had very few interlocutors (in literal terms) and there were almost no cultural intermediaries to breach the gap between that writing and the audience:

... [*Fue un*] esfuerzo en un sentido trágico, porque se fundó y se consume en su propio deseo, insistió en existir a pesar de las condiciones externas a ella (Valdés, 1987: 86).

... [It was an] effort in a tragic sense because it was founded and is consumed in its own desire, it insisted on its own existence in spite of the external conditions.

The contemporary version of *Margins and Institutions* uses exactly the same aesthetics, images and design conventions as the old one (all aspects that form the stock of this essay) and therefore communicates itself in a very similar way; its language still feels fictional and too complex, in demand for a further explanation when reading it today. Interestingly, the design features a 'book within a book' that aims to separate the original product (with its own cover image, contents page, and so on) from the later additions, stressing the original publication as an artefact to be studied and communicated or re-communicated, and therefore underlying the almost totemic nature of that first book. Indeed, in the introduction to the newer version Nelly Richard acknowledges that she was initially reluctant to see the book reprinted, since her original text has somehow completed its trajectory. Even though the new publication gives a solid and stable physique to a document that had primarily circulated as fading photocopies, it also acknowledges the importance of the previous one, re-asserted by the design choices and the 'book within a book' format. That this second book is not bilingual is, according to Nelly Richard, a gesture of stubbornness: when the country was asphyxiated by the isolation of the dictatorship, it made sense to have a bilingual text; today, when the global circulation of art demands texts marketed to an English speaking audience, the book restricts itself to its mother language. All references here are taken from the original text to allow me to quote it directly, without doing my own translation (the same goes for *Copying Eden*, also bilingual).

Richard's text has played a key role in the enduring presence of these artworks within the production and reproduction of that which is usually mentioned as a 'truly indigenous' Chilean art. In a suffocated environment of virtually no

information and highly controlled news, both the collective and the individual memories grip the very few sources available. In Chile, this has changed to some degree with the arrival of democracy and the possibility of effectively encountering more documents, more archives and therefore more cultural trajectories, a process that, as art historian Sebastián Vidal explains, was not easy due to a lack of trust; quite literally, people did not want to give their documents to custodian institutions (Barría, 2013). The opening of CeDoc in 2006 –a space within the Centro Cultural Palacio La Moneda dedicated to showcase and provide access to archive material about art in Chile from the 1970s to the present—constitutes a key stage of this opening, as it is the creation of the portal Memoria Chilena, a website that brings together disparate yet essential materials about the cultural history of the country¹. Another interesting example is the very recent publication and curatorial project of Cristián Gómez-Moya, *Human Rights| Copy Rights. Visual Archives on the Age of Declassification* (2013), which furthers the discussion about the right to see and access information, and about the role of the documentation of art for the production of social memory, of what is left in and kept out of history. Indeed Vidal, who worked as a researcher at CeDoc, has recently published a book that retraces other trajectories, different from Richard's account, which highlight, for instance, the work of artist Gonzalo Mezza, pioneer in his exploration of technology but until now somehow left out of Chilean history because it did not belong to 'Richard's filiation' (Barría, 2013).

This is not to say that Richard's book has shaped a univocal reception of the ephemeral art pieces discussed, or that the information has been transmitted unilaterally. Quite the contrary: the argument that follows stresses that the

monumental importance given to the book for years as a key historicizing agent has contributed to a personal and enduring experience of remembering.

The Secondary Spectator

Most of *Margins and Institutions* is dedicated to ephemeral art events (*acciones de arte* or action art), yet trying to figure out what actually ‘happened’ can make the reading a very frustrating experience, since the book tries to mask those events in a very programmatic manner. This type of works, as their reproduced versions, and similar ones carried out in different Latin American countries now circulate globally as ‘performances’ or ‘performance-based’ pieces, but this term was not widely used at the time in which they were originally produced (even though Richard does make the distinction in a 1987 text, referring to the works that use the body as ‘performance’, and to the city interventions as ‘art actions’). Only today people in Chile and the rest of Latin America talk about ‘las *performances*’, retaining the English word to refer to them and therefore also inscribing them, maybe without noticing it, in wider discussions about the role of performance in the transmission of knowledge and social memory. As Diana Taylor notes, ‘performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behaviour”’ (2003: 2-3), and therefore constitute a ‘system of learning, storing and transmitting knowledge’ (2003: 16). Even though the word ‘*performance*’ does not translate to Spanish and therefore people retain the foreign word, ‘the debates, decrees, and strategies arising from

the many traditions of embodied practice and corporeal knowledge are deeply rooted and embattled in the Americas' (Taylor 2003, 13).

One of the most vigorous art collectives featured in *Margins and Institutions* (and one of the most widely known now in the global scene) was *CADA*, a short name standing for *Colectivo de Acciones de Arte*. This notion of 'art of action' was central to its operations, and hence this multidisciplinary group (formed by artists, writers and one sociologist) would carry out different events aiming to destabilize both the apparatus of the dictatorship and the mechanisms of the production of art. These artistic gestures could be read in the tradition of happenings and the attempts to fuse art with life, and indeed have been approached in the context of social art by, for instance, Robert Neustadt (2001), who has also stressed that *CADA* aspired to real political action through their practice, 'redefining the exclusionary parameters separating artistic creation from public interpretation and the corresponding creation of meaning' (1999: 30); or by Deborah Cullen, curator of a 2007 exhibition tellingly entitled *Art/Vida* in the Museum del Barrio (New York), which included video documentation by *CADA* amongst other artists. Conversely, author Hernán Vidal (2007) has questioned if these attempts were ever able to go beyond the realm of aesthetics and fully enter into social and political institutions.

My own interest is to note that some actions by members of *CADA* and other individual or collective entities in Chile addressed the public in a peculiar manner, which lacks the interactive or participatory aspects that sometimes is associated with that tradition of happenings or at least a particular version of it; some of them were literally private acts or they were witnessed by very few people,

yet this encounter between the public and the document (rather than with the art piece) has not been sufficiently explored. Adriana Valdés (2006) does mention briefly, in her contribution to *Copying Eden*, that these acts were initially experienced by their protagonists in 'almost total isolation'²; Carolina Olmedo (2012) also wonders what happens when an author is almost entirely alone commenting on his/her own art, yet no further work has been done in relation to the semi-private dimension of these art actions. In the original version of Lotty Rosenfeld's art piece about the crosses, for instance, there is no public as such (other than her immediate circle), and the act was executed as an individual gesture outside her home in the wealthy street of Manquehue Norte in Santiago, Chile, close to one of the emblematic projects of President Salvador Allende that aimed to house working class people in more central, privileged areas of the city, but was later appropriated by the military. The same happens with the gesture of the poet Raúl Zurita (also a *CADA* member) of burning his left cheek as part of an act of solitary auto-mutilation: the public was not there but knows about it because of the photograph of the act reproduced in documents such as *Margins and Institutions*, which then narrates that particular gesture as being part of the Chilean art scene of the time³.

Rosenfeld's art piece re-circulated almost immediately after the original action, since the artist did a second intervention in the same street projecting the recorded images of the previous event, which in itself works as a comment about the importance of the document and the new articulations triggered by it. The artist also published a book with images of the art piece accompanied by a poetic text written by Diamela Eltit and María Eugenia Brito, which plays with the idea of

having witnessed the act and stresses the importance of this: '*Yo la vi haciendo las cruces...*' ('I saw her drawing the crosses'), it starts (in Rosenfeld, 1980: 7). Zurita's case is slightly different—even though his gesture also re-circulated through the work of other artists (Eugenio Dittborn, Carlos Altamirano) who did a series called *Visualizaciones del Purgatorio de Raúl Zurita* alluding to it, but in conceptual rather than direct terms—precisely because his initial action of self-harm had no public and was executed indoors; as such, it has created a whole series of contradictory versions about it discussed in terms of 'mythology' by, for instance, Bernaschina and Soto (2011)⁴.

Zurita himself has mentioned in different interviews how this act and others through which he is known for, such as his masturbation in front of some paintings (he has explained that this was totally private, and that only images of the act were exhibited in his art piece *No Puedo Más*), or the gesture of throwing ammoniac to his eyes, was not an art action but rather a private gesture that has acquired a certain canonical nature within the Chilean art scene through the different stories told about it. *Margins and Institutions* also contributed to this multiplicity of versions: it features a very close image of the poet with the following caption: 'Zurita, *No, No Puedo Más*, (No, I Can't Stand it Any Longer), 1979, intervention in the forum on the painter Juan Dávila, Galería Cal (ejaculation of semen smeared on his cut, bleeding and burnt face)', therefore implies that all those different acts are brought together in that single image (Richard, 1986: 64).

This description of Zurita in a conversation with the Chilean writer Sergio Fortuño interests me in particular because it puts the relationship between these

art actions and the spectator in very succinct terms: there was simply no room for the spectator in his gesture, Zurita says.

El gesto de quemarme la cara era la desesperación misma, no era una performance. Fue un acto solitario, no estaba hecho para un espectador. (Fortuño 2007).

The gesture of burning the face was pure desperation, it was not a performance. It was a solitary act, it was not meant to be for a spectator.

The translation of a private act to an artistic piece through its documentation gives a very particular dimension to his 'performed gestures' and so this way of doing art 'with an action' takes a peculiar form: these ephemeral events focus on the creative act of the artist, who embodies (rather than addresses) a potential audience, the shared community suffering during the dictatorship. That audience is therefore virtual and has no specific face or name; indeed, most of the times the viewer is not even physically present during the event, which then becomes a performance without a public, a theatre with no spectators. In other words, these performances unite the actor and the spectator in the artist's persona, and demand an engagement of the audience with their mediated form.

Because of this way of operating, Nelly Richard's *Margins and Institutions* becomes the artefact to encounter rather than the mediator between the work and the public; and yet, because of the way in which the document is constructed, it fails (or does not even attempt) to address an individual viewer. Paradoxically, the book assigns a key importance to the reader of its text but presents itself in a very enclosed manner, described by Richard as a gesture of 'masking lectures' (1987:

7) aiming to create a 'non functional' writing (8); this hermetic quality has also been noted by commentators such as Valdés (1987, 2006), who reiterates some of her earlier remarks in her contribution to *Copying Eden*. That separation seems to have had the opposite effect: as will be discussed later, the book becomes the unwanted vehicle of a very personal memory.

Encountering a Document

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander (2008) rethinks the common assumption that the live event of a performance provides a more meaningful experience for the public than its mediated version, and also that the former demands a more engaged response from the audience than the latter. This assertion, also proposed by Amelia Jones (1997), is particularly interesting when addressing the type of performance-based art actions recounted in *Margins and Institutions*, a text that provides the vehicle to encounter the art event, which had very few witnesses in its non-mediated form. Auslander is primarily concerned with the more obvious technologies of reproduction (video and particularly sound recordings) yet in a later text he also explains that, even though it is important to make distinctions between different types of mediation, it is also possible to approach 'all forms of documentation, recording and reproduction as equivalent' (2009: 83). The history of the original edition of *Margins and Institutions* very much stresses its documentary aspect: it was originally published in 1986, thirteen years after the military coup led by General Pinochet and only three years before the referendum that voted him out of government, and it was funded and published in Australia as a special edition of the quarterly journal *Art and Text*, to coincide with

the exhibition *Art in Chile: An Audiovisual Documentation*. For this reason, it looks more like a journal than a book, and it was designed with the low key, black and white aesthetic usually associated with 1970s Latin American political pamphlets. It was meant to be an archive of the work produced in Chile at the time, yet lacking the unequivocal character that most archives aim to present.

Auslander proposes that the audience enters into a dialogue with the mediated form of the artwork, and that this encounter could be as meaningful and productive as any other. Unlike Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), for instance, who discusses a notion of performance as an event that unfolds between actors and spectators who are bodily present and physically close to each other, Auslander rescues the potentially productive nature of the mediated form:

The crucial relationship is not the one between the document and the performance but the one between the document and its audience. Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than an ostensibly originary event; perhaps its authority is genealogical rather than ontological... It may well be that our sense of presence, power, and authenticity of [documented performances] derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance... for which we are the present audience (Auslander, 2009: 82).

In the case of these Chilean performances, that process of engagement only starts to unfold when the document, rather than the work, is encountered; the circulation and discussion of that document is then analogous to the public

performance. To put it in Auslander's terms, the document itself becomes the performance and the audience is created by it, in the present of that encounter rather than in the past situation of the original art action: '...the document does not simply produce an image or statement describing something that happened, it produces the "event as performance" and "the performer as artist"' (2012: 53).

Margins and Insitutions is presented in its prologue as a unique study of the circumstances surrounding the production of art in Chile, acknowledging two contrary movements: that of visualisation of a remote country and its unbearable political circumstances, and that of prolongation of certain works that, without a book like this, might have never been known or discussed. According to the initiators of the exhibition (the Chilean artist Juan Dávila, who has lived in Australia for over thirty years, and Paul Foss), the text was always very difficult to accommodate within the larger agenda of the project and the Australian authorities in charge of the show were at every point far more interested in the first movement, that of visualisation of an exotic place, than in the prolongation effect that the text would have.

Nelly Richard discusses in depth the Chilean *Escena de Avanzada*, which she defines not as a group of artists but rather as the 'dimension' of works that 'took the practice of art in a highly repressive society to the very limit of its meaning and conditions of production' (1986: 17). Very importantly, she argues that these works were caught 'between the risk of official absorption of their meaning by the dominant apparatus, and the danger of their forms becoming an instrument of the opposition's progressive ideology', and therefore that 'these practices in fact insisted on an equivocal type of message and resisted any totalization of sense'

(Richard, 1986: 19). Because the political regime was trying to keep the production of meaning under surveillance, Richard explains, artists opted for the use of multiple and proliferating meanings and referents within their art pieces. Indeed, she continues, self-censorship was more severe than the official one because the administration was not that interested in art or it never thought of it as a threat. Perhaps not surprisingly, right wing critics working in institutions that were supportive of the military regime were not afraid to show their enthusiasm for these works in order to show the liberal character of their cultural appreciation.

Nelly Richard does not discuss or describe the different channels through which art circulated during this period. There are no references to specific places where events occurred, neither an explanation of the different art galleries and institutions operating nor a reflection of the material conditions in which art was produced. Her text focuses on the strategies and visual propositions developed *within* the works and, notoriously, on the constant awareness that these might be too easily accommodated by certain organisations that were celebrating the *Escena de Avanzada* as the foundational moment of Chilean art. A clear example of this was the exceptionally positive reception of Raúl Zurita's poetic work by the mainstream critics of *El Mercurio*, the conservative newspaper most closely associated with the dictatorship; Waldemar Sommer, the art critic of this news outlet, also supported the work of visual artist such as Eugenio Dittborn or Catalina Parra.

The hardest chore facing the *avanzada* was having to struggle against just this sort of institutional manoeuvring and violence of appropriation.... Fully aware that neither their marginal positions nor their

ability to twist meaning saves them from official coercion, the Chilean artists were concerned to disrupt such manoeuvres, generating within their work *zones of resistance*, un-assimilable to order and its logical functioning.... (Richard, 1986: 27).

Because of this positive reception and easy institutional accommodation, Richard's argument is that the works produced during this period demand a shared code between the art piece and its audience that would rescue them from the process of domestication: when not self-censored, the artworks were there to be experienced by an active reader able to decode their meaning. But, as mentioned, the writing is hermetic and the images give very little information, therefore this shared code is not a space of communion between the reader and the book; rather, the reception of these art pieces (that are not discussed individually, apart from a few exceptions) takes the form of a mediated process in which the audience stands on one side and the document on the other.

The images of the book do not give much extra information either: even though they have an immediate character and almost journalistic aesthetic, most of them do not depict any specific context or place, there are no references to fashion, lifestyles, codes of the period; there is none of the visual elements that make a city recognizable – the colour of taxis and public buses, police uniforms, architectural milestones – or scenes of public revolts and protests. There are virtually no images taken in outside spaces apart from a few from *CADA* even though these art works were not clandestine, and, notoriously, almost no spectators, despite being carried out in venues open to everyone.

Unlike gallery catalogues or texts directly produced for conventional exhibitions, Richard's text does not discuss or specific art pieces but rather refer to certain general mechanisms. The book focuses on common strategies and the political agenda revealed by certain media: a particular use of photography, for instance (a key aspect of a number of works from the period is, for instance, to question the tacit link between photography, objectivity and truth), the displacement of supports, the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and, generally, the use of multiple references and proliferating meanings. Also, Richard mentions the way in which these works paved the way for a particular critical writing established as a practice of autonomous reflection rather than as an explanation of the works referred to (of which she is, arguably, the most prominent author and *Margins and Institutions* a very good example). As a result, the public is not able to grasp what actually took place, where did it happen or what was being proposed.

The works featured are varied yet they are often described as developing a discourse akin to those of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and feminism; a significant number of them show images of people, faces and close-ups, intervened, scrapped, edited, painted over or as part of a collage; there is also a notorious use of text and images from mass media, all of which contributes to a reading experience that demands more information. Even when documenting ephemeral works that very few people witnessed, the text does neither discuss nor describe many facts and simply features images with their corresponding caption telling the title of the piece, its date, medium and the place where it 'happened'.

Two of the performance-based works should be discussed at length because they have been given a crucial importance for the history of Chilean art

and because, being extremely different, give a broad idea of the sort of material covered by the book. One is *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte* (*Not to Die in Hunger in Art*), which indeed features on the book cover; the other one is *Acción de Estrella* (*Star Performance*). These are two of the very few artworks that Nelly Richard describes; to do so, she uses the convention of a long quote accommodated in a separate paragraph with a different topography and without any citation marks, as if somebody else was talking. But she does not tell who is narrating those events; instead, this appears to be ‘what is known’ collectively about the pieces.

Richard claims that *Para no Morir de Hambre en el Arte*, by CADA, became the ‘primary model for the new Chilean Art’ after 1979 (1986: 54) and, indeed, today is described as a ‘flagship’ work in the relevant catalogue entry of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, which acquired an installation with recordings and remains of the piece in 2011. The book narrates it as follows:

The overall panorama of malnutrition or the lack of basic consumer or cultural goods is presented by this work in the following manner:

-The CADA artists distribute powdered milk amongst families living in a shantytown on the edge of Santiago.

-A blank page of the magazine *Hoy* is made available as another support for the work: “Imagine that this page is completely blank/ imagine that this blank page is the milk needed everyday/ imagine that the shortage of milk in Chile today resembles this blank page”

-A text recorded in five languages is read in front of the United Nations building in Santiago, thus portraying the international view of Chile as precarious and marginal.

-In the art gallery Centro Imagen there is placed an acrylic box containing some of the bags of powdered milk, a copy of the *Hoy* issue, and a tape of the text read in front of the UN. The milk is left in the box until it decomposes. A statement on top of the box reads: "To remain here as a symbol in reverse of our deprived social body".

-Ten milk trucks parade through Santiago from a milk factory to the Museum, this highlighting for the passer by the general lack of milk.

-A white sheet is hung over the entrance to the Museum, both as a symbolic closing down of the establishment and as a metaphorical denunciation of continuing hunger (Richard ,1986: 54).

This fairly descriptive and neutral passage of a quite convoluted art piece is accompanied by three pictures of the action, in addition to the image of a white sheet displayed at the front of the Museo de Bellas Artes (Chile's National Museum of Art) featured on the book cover: one of a woman receiving the milk, another one of the process of distribution amongst the inhabitants of a shanty town, a third one of a group of trucks travelling, as the caption tells us, from the milk factory to the museum. Milk is obviously used here as a vehicle to transmit the urgency of hunger and poverty, and to highlight the indifference of the international context with regards to the Chilean situation. It is not clear, though, if the piece managed to close the traditional distance between the artist and the spectator, other than the

transient and spontaneous experience of spectatorship when the trucks were travelling. Indeed, in some unedited footage of it there is a final scene inside a gallery in which artists and a very small audience of predominantly other artists, actors (some very familiar faces of the Chilean scene) and very few other people, share a Q&A.

The second art action, *Acción de la Estrella*, is discussed as follows:

In his *Acción de la Estrella*, Leppe uses the quotation of Duchamp's star-shaped tonsure to fill in the vacant position occupied by the star on the Chilean flag. Here he questions the *transplantation* of information from international art to a new historical and national circumstance such that it changes its meaning. The living body of the artist activates the transfer of the reference, it revitalises it by making it flesh: the body is the trans-quotational vehicle for a sign that is grafted onto the skin as a living incarnation of the artistic message (Richard, 1986: 87)

In the case of the star performance, only one image is included, a picture of the artist's back with the star-shaped tonsure against the background of the projection of the Chilean flag. This is not the first time that Leppe had quoted Duchamp in his interventions: in *El Perchero* (The Coat Hanger), a previous piece constructed as a photographic montage of three different images of an art action he executed in private, he refers to Rose Sélavy, Duchamp's alter ego. As Francisco Gody has written about it, it is an interesting example of 'el carácter no presencial de su performance'; (the non-present character of its performance"; 2011); this also emphasises the observation about the lack of public in the original

act and the question about the real or implicit spectator of these works. In the star piece, the reference to Duchamp is more direct

There are obvious differences between this piece and the former one: one attempts to dissolve itself into the social apparatus and indeed its primary gesture, the distribution of milk, is a charitable action very similar to those carried out by different sectors during those years: aid is given with no further action or involvement. During those years, for instance at school we were asked to bring a '*kilo*' on a weekly basis –lentils, beans, pasta, rice, anything but salt—to be delivered to deprived areas of which we knew very little, sometimes just their name; my personal reception of these photographs imagines the delivery of our own *kilos*. Conversely, the star performance follows a movement of exteriorization that refers to the international art circuit rather than to the Chilean situation, even though it aims to internalize that external context. The tone in which they are narrated in the book could not be more different: in one case the book adopts almost the form of a list to describe what happened; in the other, the language is highly intellectualized. It could be argued that the reader is not able to develop an emphatic relationship with any of those narrations and that, as a result, needs to construct it in a personal fashion.

'Performing' History

Today the fear of institutionalization and absorption by the administrative apparatus (one of the main threats denounced in the book) appears to be redundant, particularly when considering the key, almost cult role that Nelly Richard attributes to the public and its capacity to decode the multi-meanings of a

work. It might be the case that the enemies of the *Escena de Avanzada* were others, more complex or at least different from the mere institutional appropriation. A much recent text by the same Richard, “The *Escena de Avanzada* and its Historical and Social Context” (2006), maintains not an identical but a very similar position; this second text is almost an echo of the former one, written in very different circumstances, and in this case the danger is that of the easy accommodation within the contemporary global and market driven art traffic. The article, published as one of the critical texts of *Copying Eden*, underlines the non-institutional character of the *Escena de Avanzada* and expresses a scepticism towards the current process of professionalization and internationalisation of Chilean art, aided by the publication of *Copying Eden* and its concerted effort to make Chilean art ‘known to the world’. This publication follows an encyclopaedic approach: artists are presented in alphabetical order, and it is very easy to tell that the amount of pages attributed to each one of them roughly corresponds to how present and active they are in the international circuit of big exhibitions, fairs and biennales.

There are obvious differences between the Chile portrayed in *Margins and Institutions* and in *Copying Eden*, despite the fact that some of these recent texts reaffirm arguments made earlier and that some of the works portrayed are the same. The black and white versus colour images undoubtedly cultivate the feeling that one is Chile during a cultural blackout, whereas the other one boasts an up and coming economy, an impression greatly aided by so many of the new art pieces that speak of consumption and/or use the conventions of advertisement and marketing. One is an asphyxiated and orphaned Chile, its art is very poor in

means, whereas the contemporary country attempts to appear sleek, professional, with a properly funded art scene. This is not to say that today the institutional apparatus in Chile is strong and booming or that there is an important scene of art collectors and trade. As María Berríos explains, there has been an increase in public funds devoted to art, but this appears to be a short term attempt 'to compensate for the weakness of its cultural institutions and museums'; there are more than a hundred registered galleries yet 'not even ten percent of them possess minimum curatorial rigor' (2006: 93).

One of Mosquera's most quoted phrases in his introduction to *Copying Eden* mentions that the Chilean art scene is, in his opinion, of high standard, sophisticated and complex, yet it is also a 'plateau with no peaks' and lacks spark, the equivalent of a 'soccer team who plays well, but never scores' (2006: 33); this is undoubtedly reinforced by the encyclopaedic approach chosen for his book. In spite of its differences, at times *Margins and Institutions* also feels that way, since there is no further judgement about individual pieces and the group feels like being homogenized by the term *Avanzada*. Jon Beasley-Murray uses ideas of inertia and habitus to describe Chile's political climate during the dictatorship, the feeling of resignation in front of the 'everyday authoritarianism' (2010: 253), something that, in my view, is mirrored in some images of Richard's book expressing an active yet resigned form of art activity, similar to Beasley-Murray's account of worn out or disenchanted forms of protest. Growing up there, I can certainly recognize the uneasy tranquillity of the almost permanent state of exception.

Interestingly, this felling of unnerving calm is also the rhythm of, for instance, the acclaimed *Nostalgia de la Luz*, a documentary by Patricio Guzmán

(2010) that starts with a sleepy quote about life in provincial Chile pre-dictatorship, a country in which nothing ever happens and presidents walk unguarded; that calm, the narrator tell us, was interrupted by the devastation of the coup. Yet in the film that violence is primarily inscribed in the roughness and emptiness of the Atacama dessert, where astronomers look for distant galaxies –it has the clearest sky on Earth—and mourners look for their dead ones –the ruins of Pinochet’s detention camp in Chacabuco lay there—. The documentary, as the images of *Margins and Institutions*, speak of desolation rather than of aggressive destruction.

The fact that there are almost no references to actual political struggles in *Margins and Institutions* contributes to this feeling of nervous calm: the only *protesta* (political manifestation) in the book is a painting by the artist Jose Balmes (from 1983), an acrylic on pastel and collage on canvas, which features some press cuts scratched over in Balmes’ typical expressionist fashion. A second exception is a newspaper image of an actual *protesta* depicting the Feminist Movement for Democracy in a political demonstration, but this was not an art-related movement and therefore merely works as a background.

Additionally, the images of the art pieces featured look as if they were constructed as a montage, taken either during the event or at a different point in time; indeed, most of them are close-ups of artists ‘in action’, which reinforces the absence of any public or viewer. The undisputable protagonist is the artist Carlos Leppe, both in terms of the number works featured and the flashy and carefully chosen character of the images⁵: Leppe appears in different performances from the late 1970s and early 1980s like *Prueba de Artista* (Proof of the Artist), *Cuerpo Correccional* (Punishable Body), plus the mentioned *Acción de la Estrella* and *El*

Perchero and others, always half or fully naked, exhibiting the immense mass of his body in a number of theatrical poses. Again, the viewer is nowhere to be seen, except for the profile of a woman in only one of the images, almost hidden in the dark (she is Virginia Errázuriz, an artist herself, therefore an ‘insider’).

It could be argued that the lack of information about how these performances were produced, and who was being addressed through them (Who was Leppe talking to? Was he confronting the dictator or addressing the general public? Was the art world the implicit audience of the works?) contributes to a reception that is almost out of place and time, as if these works could have been produced in any country or context, at any time. Looking at these pictures, it is not possible to tell if they were taken during the early, more oppressive and violent years of the dictatorship, or during the late, more open and less censored 1980s. Indeed, something striking that appears when interviewing people in order to gather some lived experiences of the period is that, in all cases, the (virtual) public ‘remembers’ these art pieces as happening in the early 1970s and associate them with their own, personal life experiences of those years, when in reality they actually happened (if that word is to be used) during the early 1980s.

I conducted these interviews via email and in person (depending on the location of each interviewee) as the first stage of a much broader project about the relationship between cultural memory and fiction, using a simple questionnaire about the two emblematic art actions (of Leppe and *CADA*) as the starting point of the conversations (I have translated these questions and answers here; they have never been published before):

How do you remember these art pieces or, if you did not witness them directly, the first time that you encounter or heard about them?;

Where did they happen and in which context?;

What is the main act or event in each of them?;

What meaning did you attribute to them when you first encountered them?;

What meaning do you attribute to them now?

Each person interviewed relates these art pieces to the climate of extreme violence that characterized the first years of the military regime. The black and white images have another effect: despite the individual experiences of remembering, most of the interviewees note that the book presents these artworks as if they were 'creating a school', really founding a notion of Chilean art.

This is a 45 years old Chilean artist, for instance, talking about the star performance, which is known, debated and studied in art schools through the photograph of the artist Carlos Leppe that appears in *Margins and Institutions*, showing a star-shaped tonsure in his head that overlaps with a projection of the Chilean flag that lacks its traditional white star at the top left side (this image was reprinted by the artist in 2011, in a limited edition acquired by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, another revealing example of the recent internationalization of Chilean art):

For the very first time in the history of Chilean art the flag is used without any colour. Maybe the original projection was in colour, maybe even the original images were coloured pictures, but all the published documents are in black and white. It gives me the idea that Leppe is founding the original moment of Chilean art.

A 48 years old art journalist gives a very similar account, and notes that the artist Carlos Leppe, who later become a successful publicist and television guru, must have been aware of this and so 'performed' the photograph in a very conscious manner, 'he took care of creating the corporate image, the slogan, of what was going to remain'. The star shaped tonsure also reminds her of the new-wave haircuts that were popular in the counter cultural scene that developed during the dictatorship years. The artist quoted above adds something else about the star performance and the milk distribution: he says that these actions cannot be inscribed within any frame or tradition with Chilean art because there is no such a frame. The neutral, almost undifferentiated feel of the photos could belong to any tradition, and therefore each viewer places it in a very personal narration. As another interviewee (a lawyer, 38 years old) puts it, because it is not possible to remember the body of the artist and its role within the event (we were not there and we don't even know if it actually happened), we only remember the country that contains the body of that artist. Which country? Everybody's country, the country that each of the readers experienced when they place themselves within the dictatorship lifespan.

Talking about the *CADA*'s action of milk distribution, the journalist adds that this is more of a 'myth' than a real precursor of performance art in Chile: 'Each person would tell you different story of this. Younger people know about this as a story that has been told'.

Also, interviewees refer to the fact that it is usually said and widely accepted within the Chilean art scene that some of the images printed were taken after the

event of the performance itself, in the case of ephemeral works, or that they were too conscious of trying to create a document; this seems part of a domestic myth that has been easily accommodated. That document allows the translation from a private action to an art action, particularly when it becomes part of a book like *Margins and Institutions*.

Interestingly, this gesture of consciously creating a document is also part of Auslander's argument about the relationship between the document and the audience, as he discusses when writing about Ives Klein's famous *Le Saut dans le Vide* (Leap into the Void), the 1960's performance in which the artist appears to be jumping fearlessly from a window to the street: 'Documentation is not just a supplement that provides access to the original work.... Rather, the events were staged to be documented at least as much as to be seen by an audience' (2012: 51). Amelia Jones argues something similar and adds an extra dimension to this discussion when highlighting that she has always studied and written about the canonical performances of artists such as Yoko Ono, Vito Accoinci, Marina Abramovic and many others solely through the remains or residues of those original events, and asserting that the encounter with the original action is not more privileged in terms of truth: 'While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange (viewer/reader <-> document) is equally inter subjective' (1997: 12).

The interviews conducted emphasize precisely the subjective nature of this encounter and exchange with the document, stressing how the works do not have a single identity and inhabit the public in the most varied forms; they are remembered collectively but in an individual fashion. It could be argued that,

because there is no unilateral visualisation of the country in *Margins and Institutions*, the viewer is thus intimately involved in the process of remembering the country's history, rather than having it narrated to them.

Remembering later

An important dimension of Jones' argument is that re-enactments are always able to question the assumed supremacy of the live, original event, and retrieve some of its original potentiality. The introduction to her edited collection *Perform, Repeat Record* also stresses the link between these re-enactments and memory:

Crucially, re-enactments remind us that all present experience is only ever available as subjective perception, itself based on memory; all 'events' – those we participated in as well as those that occurred before we were born—can only ever be subjectively enacted (in the first place) and subjectively retrieved later. There is no singular, authentic, 'original' event we can refer to in order to confirm the true meaning of an event, an act, a performance, or a body –presented in the art realm or otherwise (2012: 18).

In the case of the Chilean art actions, a different form of re-enactment occurs when the document meets the audience, an encounter that, quite literally, does not confirm the true meaning of those original pieces yet generates another kind of engagement. Elements of this encounter could relate to Marianne Hirsch's discussion of 'post-memory' (1997, 2012), the relationship that the generation 'after' bears to the personal and collective events (either traumatic or that bear

witness to a violent past) passed through stories, images and behaviours, experiences that now constitute memories in their own right, even though the easy translation of this term to histories different from those explored by Hirsch is potentially problematic (Perez 2014). Indeed, my research expresses how the imaginative investment and creation could permeate the members of the first generation too, since they were also second hand witnesses of the art events if they were not physically present. They are memories of the present, rather than the past (Bell, 2010).

Scholarly work about the 'memory generation' in both Chile and Argentina (Ros 2012, Stern 2004) has emphasised the contested, selective and constructed nature of memory, and therefore how difficult is to pin down the meanings of collective trauma and how they are remembered; memory is creative and selective, and people give meanings to events in deeply personal and ambivalent ways (Stern 2004 : XVIII). As Ana Ros (2012) describes, Chile has started to forge a cultural environment similar to that of Argentina in the 1990s, in which younger artists, filmmakers and writers produced work about a recent past that they did not experience directly, at least not as adults (in Chile a number of these filmmakers came together in the recent series of screenings appropriately entitled *1973: La Memoria de los Hijos* or '1973: The Children's Memory'). Arguably, it is this recent work that which exposes the tensions of 'remembering after' in more evident ways, particularly revealing the mediation of documents and narratives of all sorts. In Argentina, the controversy surrounding the widely debated film *Los Rubios* (2003) –a documentary directed by Albertina Carri, the daughter of a couple of intellectuals that was kidnapped and murdered during the dictatorship (1976-

1983)— is well known: the film is also a documentary about making the film and trying to find the real traces of the director's memory and recollections, and this allows Carri to recreate the abduction of her parents through a crafted animation scene performed by Playmobil figures and other plastic toys suddenly taken away by a spaceship. Some supposedly straightforward facts are told and retold as oral stories, drawn and re-drawn from what others have said, communicated not by primary but by second or third level witnesses. Interestingly, Gabriela Nouzeilles has described *Los Rubios* as a 'performative documentary', a cross-over between a fiction, reality and documentary that performs an 'exchange between subjects, filmmakers and spectators' (2005: 269). Much more under the radar, in Chile films such *Reinalda del Carmen*, *Mi Mamá y Yo*—a documentary in which the filmmaker remembers Reinalda (one of the *desaparecidos* or disappeared of Pinochet) through her mother, who now has amnesia, even though she never met her—have also started to acknowledge these exchanges, and how the film/document can help the ill mother to remember again, while the daughter remembers later. In *El Astuto Mono Pinochet contra la Moneda de los Cerdos*, the military coup is recreated and performed by contemporary Chilean children and youngsters using props and testing themselves on the boundaries between the factual and the fictional, both then and now, as participants of the workshop organised by the filmmakers that grounds this experiential documentary. In all three cases, the document performs with a clear awareness of its documentary character in order to question the monolithic construction of the past and any stock responses to trauma, affection and loss.

Margins and Institutions is also a document that acknowledges and guards the open nature of its gesture of documentation, emphasizing the plurality of potential meanings rather than an archival or functional act. Nelly Richard wanted to create a different type of document, and to separate completely the actions and practices of the *Avanzada* from other groups concerned with the 'coordination and diffusion of artworks in low income housing developments, unions schools and factories' (Richard, 1986: 23), and therefore involved in militant political organizations, using a combatant and semi-clandestine artwork. The latter was 'almost certainly out of touch with the *Avanzada*', she writes (Richard 1986: 23). Conversely, the *Avanzada* wanted to be visible and to operate from within established institutions, which brought it into conflict with the political aims of the Left and therefore functioned outside cultural centres favouring militant actions or at least a culture of resistance; she describes that the *Avanzada* was indeed regarded as 'elitist' by these other sectors.

The way that the *avanzada* proliferated and dispersed the signifiers of meaning was more or less ignored in the commentaries by the left: it refused to accept that the *avanzada* works require a differential type of reading, or that their plurality of voices prevents any single interpretation of them. Rather, the left tried to make the meaning of these works *functional*, adjusting it to its own development and monolithic interpretation of history (Richard 1986: 109).

Despite some references in mainstream media, the debates about these different strategies did not take place in traditional or widely consumed media

outlets or in Universities (intervened by the military) but rather in institutions such as FLACSO and CENECA and their in-house publications. According to Cristina Fernández (2007), and indeed Richard herself in *Margins and Institutions*, the latter marginalised the works produced by the *Avanzada* because it wanted to research art forms with more popular appeal and repercussions from the perspective of Social Sciences. Richard accuses left wing publications such as *Hoy*, *La Bicicleta* and *Apsi* for disregarding the new art writing scene on the grounds of its self-reflexivity, formalism and lack of references to contingent conditions (1986: 46), and mentions how the editorials and art sections of these outlets showed a tendency to read the works in relation to the social context, privileging aspects of those pieces that speak of violence or repression (108 – 9); Gonzalo Millán writes that the assessment of Zurita's poetry as being radically new, for instance, in fact mirrors the military attempt to pull the country down and start again (Richard 1986: 144). Artists themselves were also sceptical towards sociological readings of their work (Hopenhagen, 1987).

This distinction between militant art embodied in organizations such as the Coordinador Cultural (from 1982) or the A.P.J. (from 1979), which had a program based on the refusal of conventional art circuits and a commitment to integrate zones of social conflict, and that of the *Avanzada* is something that Richard has continued to stress over the years: it is reiterated, for instance, in her contribution to *Copying Eden*, and very thoroughly in an article published in the on-line journal of the Hemispheric Institute in New York. In this more recent piece she insists on a clearly cut division between politically committed art that aims to represent class struggles (and for her that means to 'speak for' certain classes, to be useful for the

revolution rather than revolutionary in itself), and the art of the avant-garde (the *Avanzada* would of course fall into the second category). In her account, certain 1970s exhibitions (pre dictatorship) such as *El Pueblo Tiene Arte con Allende* o *Las 40 Medidas de la Unidad Popular* aimed to create an art for everyone and conceived the artist as another worker, whereas the *Avanzada* reformulated the link between art and politics by getting rid of the ‘ideological repertoire of the left’. (Richard, 2009).

It might be paradoxical, but at the end these works with a ‘non-functional meaning’ where precisely the ones that became the canon and the subject of the history of Chilean art during the dictatorship, whereas others have been relegated to a secondary, almost invisible presence. And, it could be argued, it is precisely this non-functionality that which allows the very peculiar relationship between the document and the audience’s memory, however excluded the latter was from the actual pieces.

Notes

¹ I am referring to art/culture specific archives here; another archive, that of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, which focuses on human rights issues, precedes these two.

² And therefore the writing about this –the main topic of the author’s contribution to *Copying Eden*—was distributed “person by person and photocopy by photocopy—these were rough and ready affairs” (Valdés 2006: 51).

³ An image of the burned cheek also appears in Zurita’s book *Purgatorio* from 1979 –a collection of poems created from that act—but it is a very close picture of the wound, not of his whole face; interestingly, this text was republished by Ediciones UDP in 2007, and we see Zurita’s entire face in the book cover, yet it is a different image from that of *Margins and Institutions*.

⁴ There are several texts that discuss the ‘mythology’ around Zurita’s acts. Vicente Bernaschina and Paulina Soto’s is a relatively recent one, from 2011, published on-line: “La Epica Artística de Avanzada: la Palabra Autoritaria”. Zurita discusses it again in a conversation with the artist Camilo Yañez recently organised by the on-line art journal *Artishock*. The whole recorded conversation is

available at <http://www.artishock.cl/2013/04/una-conversacion-entre-camilo-yanez-y-raul-zurita/> (accessed July 30th, 2013)

⁵ Indeed he was working very closely with the theorist Nelly Richard at this stage of his career.

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